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Linguistic capital in the sector of public administration

Abstract: *The concept of linguistic capital coined by Pierre Bourdieu in the 90s of the 20th century has become especially relevant for post-modern culture. Considering the effect of globalization and internationalization on organizations it has got a particular value for them as it effectively contributes to personal capital of their workforce and consequently to their intangibles. Although the above statement has been already widely recognized by most managers of global corporations who have rather successfully implemented a proper language policy (e.g. Motorola, Nokia, Ikea, etc.), it still seems to be a serious challenge for the public administration units, especially in their local self-governments - gminas. A lack of both a recognition of the economic and symbolical value of the linguistic capital and consequently a lack of any (or a consistent) language policy in the field, reduces their chances to make use of the whole potential of firstly, their staff's personal capital and secondly, of bridging and bonding capital (Putman 2000). Today these types of capital have gained on importance in gminas due to intensive intercultural interpersonal contacts generated locally and also by means of international and intercultural networks they are part of because of various EU and global co-operation programmes.*

The aim of the present article is, firstly, to discuss the notion and the value of linguistic capital for an organization and then to research its awareness at the staff of public administration units in gminas by analysing their intercultural communication competence which is a basic communication instrument in realizing many international projects their gmina participates in. Indirectly, the study address also the issue of language policy in gminas as a sine qua non condition of its language capital. The discussion uses the results of the pilot study in the gmina of Myślenice in the Małopolska region.

Keywords: *linguistic capital, post-modern culture, public administration.*

Introduction

Although not as widely known and used as social or symbolic capital, *linguistic capital*, which constitutes a kind of cultural capital, has been lately recognized

as an important asset of an organization, be it market oriented and focused on generating tangible economic profits or functioning in the public sphere and contributing to the public goods. Its importance stems from communication playing the role of a basic medium for an organization management, especially against a global but culturally and linguistically diversified context. Globalisation resulting in, on the one hand, unification and, on the other, fragmentation of social reality has accounted for an emergence of *linguistic markets* which differently value particular use of language(s) and particular discourse(s) and their producers. They demand new competence, intercultural language competence as they attribute their own price to the languages and discourses which they treat as an instrument of action and power. *Linguistic capital* can be both symbolic and real as it can be easily converted into the economic one, which makes it an important asset of any organization and its strength when competing with other market and social space actors.

Consequently, since Bourdieu, the author of the term, *linguistic capital* has become an object of studies, but mainly in education (cf. Stanton-Salazar, Dornbusch 1995, Sullivan, 2002, Kalmijn, Kraaykamp 1996, Harker, 1990) for the simple reason that all kinds of educational institutions enable potential communicators to develop their communication competence and consequently to provide them with a successful access to the *linguistic market*. Hence they become themselves a source and a resource of a *linguistic capital*. Other areas which are slowly being examined are various aspects of modern societies. Thus Emirbayer and Williams (2005) deal with power relations in the field of social services, particularly homeless shelters. Hage (in: Dolby 2000), in turn, applies the theory of Bourdieu to analyse various manifestations of multiculturalism and racism in Australia. An interesting investigation on the value of electronic media, namely Internet, in creating cultural capital has been carried out by Emmison and Frow in 1998. It should be stressed that many researchers do not address directly *linguistic capital* but cultural capital of which it is a sub-category as the latter is a more encompassing and self-explaining term, especially if they themselves are not linguists.

Considering the growing value of communication in post-modern culture, Bourdieu's concept can be also applied to study other fields and focus, for example, on organisation management, especially how its *linguistic capital* is generated and how, in turn, it contributes to the organisation profits – both material, measured by means of economic factors and non-economic ones, which in most cases determine the former. Still, despite a large number of studies given to communication management within organisations (cf. Schultz, Tannenbaum, Lauterborn, 1993, Słomski, 2007, Winkler, 2008, to mention only a few), the idea of *linguistic capital* seems to be absent from them.

Hence the present article which attempts to find out what is the potential of *linguistic capital* in public administration units, especially the local self-governments, on the level of *gminas*, by researching intercultural communication competence of their staff. Intercultural communication competence constitutes a source of *linguistic capital* and a practical tool with which to generate it on international markets. As *gminas* have become an active participant of international projects they need their *linguistic capital* more than ever before to capitalise on them and thus generate Putman's *bonding* and *bridging capital*. An indirect objective of the study was also to analyse the language policy of *gminas* which is the means to enhance the linguistic resourcefulness of their administrative staff.

The study, which is treated as pilot, has been carried out in the *gmina* of Myślenice in the Małopolska region with a well developed network of international contacts. It was hypothesised that the better developed the intercultural communicative competence of the administration staff directly involved in international and intercultural activities, the more efficient the co-operation.

At least two reasons account for the choice of the area of present studies. Firstly, it can be argued that public administration is still treated as a foster child of public institutions, and consequently it does not use to the fullest the potential it has to improve its performance and enlarge its profits. Its internationalisation illustrates the issue. Due to various European Union programmes promoting co-operation within European and world cities and regions many activities of public administration units cross national and cultural borders in a geographic sense, but the results achieved do not always meet expectations. Secondly, in Poland, despite their visible advantages, many management principles, among them proper language policy, which have been successfully implemented by market organisations still tend to be very slowly adapted by the administration sector. Although *linguistic capital*, as follows from the examples of many transcultural corporations, has become vital for their functioning on the market, public administration does not seem to be sensitive enough to the above issue how to empower their staff and make them more productive in generating it and enhancing the overall capital of the *gmina*.

1. Pierre Bourdieu and the concept of linguistic capital

The term of *linguistic capital* was coined in the 90s of the 20th century by Pierre Bourdieu, a French social philosopher whose output includes studies in education, culture, art and language. Michel James Grenfell in his recent book *Bourdieu, language and linguistics* (2011) calls him a 'public intellectual' whose

role can be compared to such great minds of the 20th century as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Michel Foucault. Bourdieu (1990:114) used the concept of *linguistic capital* to define a specific form of embodied *cultural capital* which, in this case is understood as the mastery of and relation to language. It stands for a means of communication and self-presentation acquired from one's surrounding culture and it is generated by a proper use of language in a proper social context – a *habitus*. The *habitus*, roughly speaking, plays the role of a *linguistic market* which assigns specific meanings to particular uses of language. The meanings conveyed depend not only on *content* (what is said) but also on *form*, e.g. the way the message has been packaged by means of linguistic structures (cf. discourse *genres*, e.g. advertisements). The *form*, in turn, stands for *style* which can be defined as different ways of saying the same things by striking the right proportions between a *sociolect* (a social use of language) and *idiolect* (an individual use of language) according to the perceiving subject/addressee/audience/objectives.

Through a use of the legitimate language, that is the language which fits the *linguistic market*, its producer can exercise their social competence which is a marker of their social power and a tool to impose their authority and have things done. The legitimate language which usually is the dominant language has often emerged as such as a result of a historical process, in many cases marked with conflicts as was the case of the colonial context for it. Thus sociologically pertinent differences in language tend to reflect social and economic oppositions and re-translate social and economic differences. On the other hand, language can also level them creating bonds of solidarity and positive relations among its producers.

Let me stress that for Bourdieu capital always refers to social relations within a system of exchange that confers power and status. In the case of *cultural capital* accumulated cultural knowledge acts as a source of power and status differentiating its producers while the differentiating power of *linguistic capital* results from the ability of its source, a discourse producer, to use right words, grammar, register, tone, body language, that is all means of verbal and non-verbal communication so as to speak to the point, in a manner that fits the situation and follows the communication scripts proper to it, and serves to have the communication objectives achieved. The *linguistic market* which functions as a factor structuring social relations and defining them in terms of status, power and action (who can achieve what), assigns a certain value to the types of language and discourses available to the speaker who should choose from their repertoire those ones whose *market price* is the highest.

The *linguistic market* behaves as any other market which consists of various commodities, ideas and abilities and evaluates them using economic relations

within which under specific circumstances certain linguistic capabilities possess a higher currency than others. For Bourdieu two complementary characteristics define a *linguistic market*: on the one hand it is substantial as it refers to well-defined social situation, on the other it is abstract because of the rules that assign a certain value to the language used by its producer, as well as the spread, accumulation and reproduction of *linguistic capital*. Similarly to economic capital which results in class distinction, also all other types of capital serve to classify their producers as either dominated or dominant creating a certain social hierarchy, accepted by some but contested and rejected by others.

In his discussion of language Bourdieu (1990:66-67) uses market oriented terms to draw attention to the practical aspect of language use and its value. In this way he also breaks away from the intellectual tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky. He thus replaces *speaker* with *producer*, *receiver* with *consumer* and *linguistic exchange* with *economic exchange* with the status of a *product*. A *product* is a sign of wealth (*capital and profits*) and authority (*power*) depending on its *price* established by the market.

The philosophical foundations of Bourdieu's *linguistic capital* are shared with Robert Putman's (2000) concept of *soft power* with its locus in culture and its effects visible in tangible manifestations of reality, e.g. in real economic power of nations. *Soft power* serves to generate social capital, the *intangibles*, in two forms, *bonding* and *bridging*, both of which are built by means of interpersonal social relations. Intracultural interpersonal relations account for generating *social bonding capital* (Putman 2000:74) as they work as frames for solidarity and common interests and consequently encourage users of the same culture to collaborate to achieve common aims. Intercultural interpersonal relations are a source of *cultural bridging capital* which is created by the potential of differences among individuals who are able to transgress the challenge of the difference and create new ties to work together. Although Putman does not use the concept of language communication directly, it is implied because communication is a basic dimension of culture and social life as well as their vital medium. A degree of its mastery (communicative competence) determines in most cases social success or failure of any social actor, be it an individual or a group.

Communicative competence, and especially intercultural communicative competence, are practical tools with which to create at a potential communicator the ability to act as a resource of *linguistic capital* which, in post-modern societies is deeply rooted in *bonding and bridging capitals* as neither institutions nor individuals can exist on their own and primarily global relations decide about their market position and worth. Let me stress that the link between (intercultural) communicative competence of an institution staff and its capital

is direct and overt in the case of Pierre Bourdieu's *linguistic capital* and implied when Robert Putman's concept of *social capital of bonding and bridging* type are considered. Communicative competence which allows the communicator to use such language and discourses which are more highly priced than others on the *linguistic market* embraces three basic components: 1/knowledge, both linguistic (grammar, semantics, discourse management devices) and para-linguistic (e.g. social, cultural, political), 2/communication and social skills as well as 3/attitudes. Michel Byram (1997:91-103) calls them *saviors* and defines them in the following way: 1/*savoir être* which refers to attitudes of curiosity and openness in contacts with others, 2/*savoirs (knowledge)* of social groups, their products and practices both in the producer's and receiver's culture, 3/*savoir comprendre* which are skills of interpreting and relating, 4/*savoir apprendre/faire* which are skills of discovery and interactions, and 5/*savoir s'engager* which consists of an ability of critical cultural awareness.

As follows from the above concept of (intercultural) communicative competence, it is not merely a communicative and relational tool but an instrument to do things with words (Austin, 1975) and to transform the non-linguistic reality in such a way as to have the aims met. A proper language and multicultural policy promoted by an organization assists its staff in developing (intercultural) communicative competence by making them acquire useful knowledge, master necessary skills and create proper attitudes. Consequently, its workers become resourceful when communicating/co-operating with partners, which has a direct impact on the institution capital.

2. Cultural diversity – a challenge for Polish administration units on the level of gminas

Cultural and language diversity has been taken for granted in the case of global corporations whose managers, as posited by Fons Trompennars (2002:15) have to function at a crisscross of their own culture, the culture of the country where they work and the organisational culture of the company for which they work. Consequently, as if by definition, development of intercultural communicative competence embracing social and communication skills at their top workers has been given much attention and a proper language and multicultural policy has been adopted by most of them (cf. Motorola, Nokia, Ikea). The multicultural aspect of Polish administration units, in particular the ones functioning on the level of *gminas*, is not that obvious although among many of its activities defined by the *Ustawa o samorządzie gminnym* (A bill on local self-governments) from 1990 *gminas* are obliged to co-operate with local communities of other countries. The legal frames for such a co-operation have been also created by

article 172 in the *Constitution of the Polish Republic* which corresponds to the text of article 10 par. 2 and 3 from the *European Chart of Local Self-Government* from 1985. Apart from the new multiculturalism of *gminas* resulting from their partnership with European regions and cities promoted by the policy of the European Union, there are three other areas where cultural diversity is visible. They are: 1/historical migration and ethnic diversification of the *gmina* population, 2/new migrations, 3/economic globalization resulting in branches of global corporations operating in Poland, e.g. Coca Cola in Niepołomice.

Historical migrations have changed the ethnic structure of Poland. Today representatives of nine national minorities and four ethnic minorities live in Polish *gminas* where they are both a chance and a threat for its social, cultural and economic capital. Most often their presence generates only costs such as the costs of education in their own languages, of preservation and development of their own cultural heritage, etc. Their capital potential tends to be ignored as in most cases the local authorities lack knowledge and sensitivity to act properly. New migrations include economic immigrants mainly from the former Soviet Union, China and Vietnam as well as transit immigrants, often from economically underprivileged Asian countries, political refugees from Chechnya, displaced Poles who can come back to Poland within the *Programme Rodak (Compatriot)*, tourists, and professionals from economically more advanced countries (Paszko, 2012). A proper educational policy as well as all kinds of initiatives to integrate the foreigners with local people belong to important tasks of *gmina* administration and if properly put in practice they result in creating a new quality of life for the whole *gmina*.

Many programmes of international co-operation have been put in practice by the European Union resulting mainly in vivid socio-cultural exchanges between European regions 16 of which are in Poland, e.g. the Euro-region Tatry. The basic aim of their co-operation is not only to promote their cultural heritage but also to use culture to stimulate creativity and innovativeness of their inhabitants thus positively impacting their economic growth and unemployment rate (Nawrót, 2003). Since 1989 there has been operating the Programme of Twin cities which has turned out to be especially beneficial for small cities and villages. It encourages grass root initiatives, teaches civic virtues and by increasing mobility of average people gives them an opportunity to gain theoretical and practical knowledge as well as some direct experience of the other, to develop communicative competence, relational abilities, know-how, self-recognition, self-esteem, prestige, etc. The role of the *gmina* administration consists in co-ordinating and organizing the exchange, especially in its initial phase by creating and maintaining relations with partner cities, preparing study tours and educational programmes for their partners and for themselves

abroad, encouraging cultural exchange programmes, etc. (Hałas, 2003:16). As they become acquainted with examples of their partners' good practices they get new tools with which to generate their own potential to administer better their *gmina* by assisting the needs of its inhabitants in a more efficient way. Their knowledge and experience empower them, which in turn encourages their self-governance and turns them into a more resourceful contributors generating social and cultural capitals.

It is obvious that globalization needs a proper communication medium and a mastery of intercultural communication competence becomes an unquestionable must. The bigger the *linguistic capital* of the local administration staff, the better the results of their work for the *gmina* as a whole and for its individual inhabitants. Considering the above, *gmina* authorities should be interested in providing their workers, at least those who are directly involved in the process, with opportunities to develop their *linguistic capital*. It is always possible to use a professional interpreter and translator but a multi-level structure of a communication act points out their limited role in the process. Their efficiency is primarily visible on the factual level which consists in exchanging information but they may be less successful on two other levels - creation of interpersonal relations (relational level) and acting (action level). Besides, informal, friendly and private contacts outside the protocol, agendas and meeting rooms when people discuss issues apparently irrelevant to their official visit, often tend to be more advantageous for their participant than formal talks and meetings. It is during the former when all kinds of capital are generated, especially *individual capital* which latter on can be used for the good of the whole community.

3. The linguistic capital of the administrative staff in the gmina of Myślenice

The choice of the *gmina* of Myślenice to carry out the pilot research resulted from its rather strong cultural diversity, both inherited from the past (a Jewish cultural heritage) and consistently created at present. The present facet of the *gmina* multiculturalism has two main aspects economic and cultural. Investments by global corporations such as *Cooper Standard Automotive* or Polish ones which operate on international markets, e.g. *Polplast* mark the economy-powered cultural diversity which is strongly encouraged by the initiatives of the *Myślenice Agency of Economic Development*. Culture-oriented diversity is created by more actors due to a vivid co-operation of Myślenice with three twin cities in Europe (German Ludenscheid, French Tinqueux, Hungarian Csopak) and one - Dahlonga - in the USA, intercultural festivals organized by the Association

“The Myślenice Community”, activities of the “Myślenice Cultural Association”, activities of ethnic minorities on the territory of the *gmina* and 13 immigrants who have officially settled in the area (9 in the city itself and 4 in the *gmina*).

One of the basic questions was how representative is the *gmina* of Myślenice for Polish *gminas* and consequently how should we treat the results of the study. The answer for the first question is positive although Myślenice belongs to relatively rich *gminas* and its close location to Krakow results in many people working there and also spending there their leisure time. As far as its multiculturalism is concerned its manifestations are the same as in other Polish *gminas*. Considering the above, the results of the pilot research can be taken for representing average multicultural tendencies proper to Polish *gminas*.

To identify the *linguistic capital* of the administrative staff of the *gmina* of Myślenice its members were administered a questionnaire and additionally the head of the Unit of the City Promotion who is also a director of the folk dancing and singing ensemble “Ziemia Myślenicka” and the head of the department of citizen’s and social affairs were interviewed. Only 15 workers which is less than 1/3 of the whole staff decided to answer the questions from the questionnaire, which can be explained either by their lack of interest in the area indicating their lack of awareness of the issue and its importance or just their unwillingness to co-operate as they might have been afraid of their inability to give answers. The questionnaire was administered during their working hours so they could not use the argument of being busy. The questions (15 altogether) were grouped in five categories each of which dealt with such vital issue for developing *linguistic capital* as 1/awareness of a *gmina linguistic market* created by various forms of its cultural diversity, 2/recognition of these manifestations as a *gmina* asset and 3/a factor positively influencing the work of public administrators or a barrier, 4/definition of their own sub-competencies of intercultural communicative competence, 5/*gmina* activities assisting its administrative workers in developing their intercultural communicative competence.

Our analysis of the empirical data has allowed us to draw certain conclusions which, in general, point out a very low level of *linguistic capital* of the *gmina* administrative staff. Most of them (61%) see multiculturalism as an active co-existence of and an exchange among cultures which impacts their understanding of a *linguistic market* in their *gmina*. On the other hand, for 38% of the respondents the concept of multiculturalism was limited to ethnic diversity excluding its other manifestations. Additionally it was the Jewish who were always pointed out probably because of close links with a Jewish community in New York and a joint project to restore a Jewish cemetery. The media effect should be also considered as Polish-Jewish relations are given more space in the public discourse than it is with any other ethnic group. The

respondents (43,5%) did not recognize new migrants as factors of their *gmina* cultural diversity. There may be two reasons of such responses: firstly their small number and, secondly, their being married to Poles. Such an understanding of multiculturalism made the administrative workers also claim that most Polish *gminas* are perfectly monocultural.

The results were even more disappointing when the questions were more specific and aimed at defining institutionalized forms of multiculturalism resulting from various forms of *gmina* activities. It is surprising that only as little as 23% of the *gmina* administrative staff were able to identify any multicultural activity initiated by their employer. As for those who were aware of it, 50% indicated intercultural associations and their programmes both in Poland and abroad, 30% mentioned partnership with foreign cities, 20% specified exhibitions, festivals and concerts while 10% referred to the activities of the museum “Dom Grecki” (Greek House). It is surprising that those who are directly involved in them know so little about them. The responses may indicate that the projects realized by the *gmina* either need better promotion or their results are not satisfactory as they do not meet the needs of the *gmina* inhabitants.

When asked to evaluate the effects of multiculturalism on the functioning of their *gmina* and on their own professional competencies, 20% of the respondents claimed that it enriches their local culture, 10% believed that it helps create positive attitudes in the *gmina* inhabitants and 20% considered it as a factor of economic growth. Only one respondent saw the cultural diversity of the *gmina* as a factor facilitating development of intercultural communication competence and for two workers it accounted for better intercultural competencies of the administrative staff. Two workers claimed that multiculturalism is a barrier, mainly communicative, in their work and endangers their routine functioning. As much as 46% of the respondents were not able to give any example of the effects of multicultural co-operation beneficial for the *gmina*, which directly point out their low interest in multicultural initiatives but even more their lack of awareness that it can be a source of capital.

The questions addressed to identify intercultural communication sub-competencies which a worker in the *gmina* administration should master show that a knowledge of a foreign language is the most highly valued but the least well developed (79%). It is followed by curiosity, openness and a positive attitude towards the other, which according to the respondents have been sufficiently mastered by them (85%). They have indicated the following barriers to intercultural communication: prejudice, ethnocentrism, lack of linguistic competence, stereotypes (82%) but while self-evaluating they claimed that their true difficulty is a lack of linguistic competence. This is a

very interesting statement because it points out that a common understanding of verbal communication is devoid of its cultural and social context (*habitus*), the concepts crucial for a successful functioning on the *linguistic market*. Such an approach to intercultural communication was also evidenced by treating a lack of cultural knowledge and a positive evaluation of cultural diversity as peripheral. When directly asked to evaluate their intercultural communicative competence, the respondents were very positive (72%), although they admitted that in direct face-to-face contacts their language skills are not always satisfactory.

In the last group of questions one of the most important postulates was to educate both young people and the administrative staff in multicultural issue (44%) and to promote learning English (58%). As follows from their answers an interpreter is always present during all official meetings, both in Myślenice and abroad. Their partners, except for Germans, also have a very poor or none command of English, which does not motivate them to start self-learning a language or to attend a language course. During informal meetings they can always manage, because as one of the respondents has said “if you are well disposed towards your interlocutor, you can always find a way to be understood. It is true that our relations are very poor and we cannot benefit from them the way we could if we knew the language, but it is always a nice and enriching experience”.

The above sentence is significant as it draws out attention to the fact that even a direct and personal experience of multiculturalism does not really encourage its participants to become more mindful communicators although they tend to be aware that intercultural communication competence would make them capitalize on the value of cultural diversity. Thus their *linguistic capital* tends to be dormant although their wish to get some multicultural education proves that the time for changes has already started.

Conclusions

A proper understanding of multiculturalism and of the value of its various local manifestations constitutes the biggest challenge for the public administration workers in *gminas* as it determines the concept of *linguistic market* and *linguistic capital*. A complexity of multiculturalism as well as its capital resourcefulness are often ignored or undermined and consequently it may be treated as a barrier to a clerical job. Direct contacts with international partners and participation in joint projects and programmes do not promote a proper understanding of the need to develop intercultural communication competence because communication problems are solved by a professional interpreter and

during informal meetings there is always a chance to say a few words and to use lots of non-verbals to be understood. Polish administrative workers are not motivated to develop their intercultural communication competence by the examples of their colleagues whose command of foreign languages is the same. On the other hand, the same workers can correctly identify barriers to intercultural communication and postulate an intercultural education programmes of which they would like to be recipients. It should be also stressed that despite a rather low *linguistic capital* of the public administration workers in the *gmina* of Myślenice, many international and intercultural projects beneficial for the whole community have been successfully realized. An explanation of the paradox is possible if we admit that the real *linguistic capital* of the *gmina* workers is bigger than the declared one. They often act intuitively according to the situation and definite tasks but when asked to name what they have been doing they often fail reminding us of a Molier's character, Monsieur Jouardin, who did not know that he was speaking prose.

The situation can be improved by providing administrative workers with some course in multiculturalism, its manifestations, values and role in generating social capital as well as economic capital. Some special attention should be given to make them acquainted with the concept of *linguistic capital* and its practical tool – intercultural communication competence. They should be also offered an opportunity to develop this kind of competence. Furthermore, thanks to a consistent motivation system policy they should be encouraged to undertake some efforts to enhance their own resourcefulness on the *linguistic market*. Although only a few workers are directly responsible for intercultural co-operation in the *gmina*, it would be advisable to create *ad hoc* teams involving other workers as well some average citizens when particular projects are realized. In this way more people will know about the projects and the value of multiculturalism, they will also feel responsible and empowered. Finally, it seems that the many initiatives undertaken by various public actors in the field of intercultural relations should be better promoted by *gmina* among its own administrative staff who should be well informed about the work of the whole institution.

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